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McLean, Robert; Maitra, Dev R.; Holligan, Christopher

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## Voices of Quiet Desistance in UK Prisons

### Exploring emergence of new identities under desistance constraint

*“Men make their own history...but under conditions encountered, given, and transmitted from the past”<sup>1</sup>.*

Dev R Maitra, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, Sidgwick Site, Cambridge CB3 9DA. Telephone: 07471208986; email: drm58@cam.ac.uk

Robert Mclean, Interdisciplinary Research Unit on Crime, Policing and Social Justice, School of Education, University West of Scotland, Ayr campus, KA8 0SX, UK. Telephone: 01292886000; email: robert.mclean@uws.ac.uk

Chris Holligan, Interdisciplinary Research Unit on Crime, Policing and Social Justice, School of Education, University West of Scotland, Ayr campus, KA8 0SX. Email: chris.holligan@uws.ac.uk

#### ABSTRACT

The article explores desistance dynamics within prison, and what gang members say about its phenomenology. Qualitative methodology was adopted with research participants in English and Scottish prisons. The findings indicate desistance oriented dispositions develop gradually once gang ties, originating in the street gang, lose the resonance they once exercised on conformity to offending behaviour. This liberation from oppression means not merely that gang members are *de facto* left to fend for themselves, but also to find a liminal space in which to thrive. It gives them an opportunity to learn and develop pro-social values. Spirituality, a source of personal meaning, supports progression to desistance and fosters distance from the street self. Gang members' loyalties and conflicts pre-dating incarceration challenge the potential of prison to break criminogenic ties and foster desistance.

#### KEY WORDS

desistance, gangs, learning, spirituality,

#### ORIENTATION

The sociology of masculinities and the prison confirm prison as a volatile and hostile environment (Sykes 1958). Criminal justice sanctions foster custodial circumstances

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire, 1852.

that at first blush deny space for desistance. Levi-Strauss (1963) reworking Marx says “men make their own history but they do not know they are making it”, an insight about the role of foresight and the human condition. Our paper traces this emphasis, tensions of structure over agency, through data and argument. The severity of adversity including substance abuse and mental health issues experienced by many prisoners prior to incarceration is unlikely to create a co-operative, peaceful and calming carceral environment (Liebling 2013). But does this importation warrant pessimism about agency for desistance trajectories in prison? If street gang membership structure on the outside is burdensome, then incarceration, *ceteris paribus*, is potentially liberating. It might offer space and time to allow mellowing of the self. Our research questions are, firstly, if custodial incarceration supports desistance how is this manifested? Secondly, what factors undermine a dynamic towards desistance, inside prison? Our argument is incarceration can provoke conditions for desistance but, as prison experience is gripped by criminogenic phenomena, change may be suppressed.

Our knowledge of how imprisonment impacts the desistance of gang members is under-researched. On the one hand escape from the gang on the outside may erode gang solidarity, on the other hand pressures of threat and violence inside may compel inmates to rely on bonds of gang affiliation (Worrell and Morris 2012). Our contribution aims to illuminate not only the dynamic between desistance from the gang and being incarcerated, but also explain why prison can impose contrary trajectories. Dooley *et al.* (2014) report prison gang membership in the US increases recidivism greatly; our sample, however, are not members of a prison gang formed inside prison, but rather they members of gangs outside prison. The importation perspective on the sources of a violent prison culture argues inmates’ criminogenic biographies underlie its dangerously hostile environment (Dooley *et al.* 2014; Gaes *et al.* 2002).

Desistance is a cessation of criminal offending. Periods of incarceration can introduce identity change, a feature of desistance, but processes of identity work can however impede pro-social constructions of self (Phelan and Hunt, 1998). What constitutes the *exact point* at which offending stops is a heavily contested notion (Maruna and Immarigeon 2004); the role incarceration plays in this is highly debatable, yet there is a steadily growing body of research on the process of desistance amongst offenders .

While this typically focuses on offenders following their release from prison (Maruna 2001, 2008; Glynn 2014), there has been less attention paid to individuals who begin the process of desistance whilst *serving* custodial sentences suggesting incarceration may help desistance. In this regard, limited attention has been given to the process of desistance during incarceration, as opposed to afterwards, as prison is rarely viewed as an arena where desistance may emerge. The traditional focus is on the *effects* of prison on the post-release lives of prisoners (Maruna 2001).

This article attempts to augment a limited body of work about desistance (Maruna 2001; Deuchar *et al.* 2016b), with specific focus on imprisoned gang members and how the apparent lack of gang presence in prison can aid desistance, drawing upon qualitative findings from two larger studies, which explored desistance amongst gang members. In doing so the paper aims to not only give a voice to offenders from a variety of regional and ethnic backgrounds, but also seeks to use such findings to recommend future policies which may encourage incarcerated gang members to engage actively in primary desistance. The literature review establishes the topic of study, and gaps in research. Thereafter, the article presents findings through thematic analysis articulating with the research questions. A discussion will then ensue before recommendations for policy and practice are given.

## **BACKGROUND**

Desistance in relation to gang activity is an area which has only begun to receive greater attention in recent years (Gordon *et al.* 1994; Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Moloney *et al.* 2009). In the study conducted by Gordon *et al.* (1994: 80), the evidence indicated “*a substantial increase in drug selling, drug use, violent delinquency and property delinquency when boys are active gang members*”. Although this study found a decrease in the levels of drug-dealing once youths left their gang, it also concluded that “*boys report that increased violence and drug use persist after they leave gangs*” (*ibid*). Accordingly, it is unclear to what extent leaving a gang consists of *knifing off* one’s past. Moreover, the above study focuses exclusively on *youth* gang membership, and does not sample any adults over the age of 22. Other studies on the desistance of gang members indicate that members desist from gangs both abruptly and gradually (Decker and Lauritsen 2002 cited in Densley 2013:133). It should also

be noted that existing research on desistance – whether amongst gang members or offenders more generally – almost exclusively focuses on desistance outside prison. Indeed, it appears that the concept of desistance beginning in prison is perhaps a political anathema, and a conundrum for prison abolitionist criminologists. Besides human rights issues, this is predicated on the view that prison is an inherently criminogenic environment, but does not consider the fact that many offenders live in external environments which are also inherently criminogenic, and dangerous to their wellbeing (Anderson 1999).

It has become increasingly acknowledged that prisons gangs form a key part of some carceral environments. Worrell and Morris (2012) perceive them in terms of conflict groups, defending honour and organising criminal activity. Dooley *et al.* (2014) emphasise the prison gang has its roots from within the prison system, not the street; its activities overlap with street oriented criminal gangs. Gangs in the American prison system are more entrenched than in other Western nations, a fact undoubtedly connected with a prison demography undergoing very long sentences (Kahn and Zinn 1978; Moore 1978; Blatchford 2008; Skarbeck 2014). Although there are not comparable levels of violence in English prisons, it is a conjecture to suggest that prison gangs, in the US sense, do not exist in England. Indeed, a growing body of literature indicates that prison gangs are becoming increasingly powerful within the English penal system (see, e.g., Phillips 2012; Setty *et al.* 2014; Maitra 2015b). Such gangs may often begin as collectives of prisoners from similar areas or sharing a similar racial background (Wood and Adler 2001; Wood 2006), and, consequently, do not always present themselves as tightly structured entities (Phillips 2008; Maitra 2015b). There are examples of English street gangs being ‘imported’ into prisons (Maitra 2015a, 2015b), as well as gang membership sometimes being predicated upon religious identity (Liebling *et al.* 2011).

The phenomenon of ‘gang importation’ should not surprise: according to Jacobs (1974, 1977) US street gangs ‘import’ their membership-bases, structures and activities into prison. Importation is heightened, unsurprisingly, if gang members are imprisoned in the same penal establishment, suggesting a re-activation of criminal sociality on the inside. This process appears to contrast with ‘prisonization’ (Clemmer 1940), where penal sub-culture negatively shapes the identities of prisoners but, as

this process inevitably involves prison culture, the existence of any gang collective colours 'prisonization'. Indeed, the importation perspective can be applied to both gang-affiliated and unaffiliated prisoners, as it states that experiences of the external world affect a prisoner's 'in-prison' behaviour (Irwin and Cressey 1962). Subsequently, a prisoner will identify with one of the prevailing sub-cultures within the prison, based on individual factors such as length of sentence and offending histories.

### **Primary and Secondary desistance**

This paper's analysis draws upon the established distinction in criminology between two main forms of desistance, primary and secondary. Primary desistance refers to change in behaviour, whereas secondary desistance refers to deeper changes in the offender's core identity (Maruna and Farrall 2004). Desistance occurs in several settings, triggered by numerous factors, and motivated by a multitude of phenomena. Maruna (2001) offers a particularly detailed description of the desistive process: for example, protracted involvement with the criminal justice system may render an individual disillusioned by lack of life changes due to their criminal behaviour (ibid).

An individual engaging in primary desistance may, therefore, change his behaviour so that it incorporates engaging in legitimate industries, becoming a productive member of society and refraining from associating with delinquent peers (ibid). Contrast this with secondary desistance, where the individual wishes to transform his identity as an offender, and where this may be affected by multifaceted personal factors such as an individual's race or religion. The role of religion in the desistive process is receiving more intense academic scrutiny (Liebling *et al.* 2011; Deuchar *et al.* 2016a). A distinction should also be drawn between factors which *cause* desistance (for example, an individual wanting to change the trajectory of his life) and factors which *aid* desistance (for example, an individual finding work, a faith or starting a family). The prison context seems anathema to desistance in any of these mooted forms.

Existing criminological scholarship highlights heightened rates of delinquency and violence amongst gang members in prison (Wood and Adler 2001; Wood 2006). Much of this may be attributable to the elevated levels of violence which is a characteristic of street gangs (Densley 2013). These factors contribute to aggravating the criminogenic environment of prison sociality. Indeed, there has been increasing

criticism of prisons in certain countries – such as the United States – where the punitive and seeming non-rehabilitative ethos of its retributive penal system has arguably contributed little to encouraging desistance, judging by the growing penal demography (Wacquant 2002). A distinction between the penal philosophy of prisons in the United States compared to those in Europe, however, encourages more hope for those held in European carceral settings. There is a nascent body of work on prison gang members in England (Earle and Phillips 2012; Phillips 2012; Maitra 2016), and it is not yet understood whether gang members have been successful in engaging with desistance-relevant processes including their dispositional change, when behind bars. This paper accordingly attempts to address gaps in knowledge in terms of insider experience by addressing our research questions.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Primary data gathered between 2012-2016 was drawn across two geographically disparate sites which sought to investigate and explore gangs and gang membership. These sites were in the de-industrialised west of Scotland and a socio-economic parallel area in the north of England.

### **English Site**

Participants (n= 40) from the English site were accessed via the adult prison service, with interviews being conducted in two adult male prisons in a county in the north of England. Once initial contact was established, follow-up interviews were arranged at the prisons in question. Access had to be negotiated with the National Offenders' Management Service (NOMS). To maintain the developing rapport, participants were sent questionnaires and personal correspondence between interviews. Through repeated contact it was hoped that the deep, personal narratives which have previously been found to emerge through this methodological approach would become apparent, as compared to short, 'one off' interviews, during which it is difficult to build rapport (Davies *et al.* 2015). Interviews were semi-structured, and included a range of questions dealing with prisoners' personal histories, offending histories, and own morality. Once collected, the data were fully transcribed (both from oral interviews and questionnaires) and manually coded.

## **Scottish Site**

In total, in-depth interviews were conducted with 34 male participants, aged 16-27 years. Over half had been incarcerated at some point. Data were drawn from a larger study exploring gang organisation as a means for gang business. Set criteria required participants to be a) over 16 years of age, b) live in the Glasgow conurbation, and c) have had experience of group offending in accordance with the Violent Reduction Unit's (VRU) (2011) description of street gangs, or Police Scotland's definition of Serious Organised Crime Groups (SOCGs) (Scottish Government, 2009, 2015). Participants were initially accessed via outreach projects on Scotland's west coast with staff being gatekeepers, yet following difficulties associated with accessing hard-to-reach populations (Bhopal and Deuchar, 2016) a snowball sampling technique was duly applied whereby interviewees were asked to recommend additional contacts. Meeting set criteria, data were recorded via audio devices to provide insights into the desistance process and how prison may facilitate, or could be used to more effectively facilitate such procedures.

## **RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

A thematic analysis of the data identified three recurring themes consistent across the two national sites. These were: *Erosion of gang solidarities*, *Initiating primary desistance* and *Hindrances to desistance in prison*. In the following sections, data is presented under these themes and participants are coded - for example, English Participant 1 (EP1) and Scottish Participant 1 (SP1).

### **Erosion of gang solidarities**

Given that most participants interviewed within both the English prison and Scottish prison system retained, or had previously retained gang affiliations that were established prior to imprisonment, it was important to first investigate the role of this gang phenomenon within the wider ambit of the UK prison system. In the English prison system there remained, at first blush, ambiguous evidence that an importation of prison gangs *per se* existed in terms of authoritative power over inmates outside the gang. EP5 emphatically asserted that few prison gangs existed in the contemporary carceral setting:



*Prison gangs are non-existent; gangs have gone. The so-called gang members can't do anything because CCTVs are all around...I don't know about other jails. There's no respect for real gang members...our hands are tied. The number of fights has gone down a lot from before...It's all gone...cos that threat of being watched is there. When it comes to gangs now, it's disintegrated. Before, if you'd have problems on the out, they'd come in here, but now it's all gone.*

Primary and secondary desistance processes, can, in view of this analysis, begin to purchase. While EP5 asserted that there were 'so called' gang members in the prison system, he further argued that prison gangs, in the US form, were not efficacious inside. EP5 attributed much of this to two factors, a) the presence of strict security, and b) the difficulties associated with defining what constituted a prison gang. Where gangs existed, they tended to be street gangs imported from out-with the prison system (see Maitra 2015b).

This was also true of the Scottish context. While Scotland has more street gangs than the city of London, there is a very limited presence of prison gangs in Scotland. Where Scottish prison gangs proved most likely to be found was in Young Offenders' Institutions (YOIs). Similarly, with participants from the English site, inmates typically imported gang affiliation from street gangs into the prison system. SP1, who had served time in both a YOI and later in an adult prison, noted:

*'Prisons here [in Scotland] don't have prison gangs. No cunt can be bothered way that shite when you're older. That's for [youths]. Daft to fight wi' cell mates just cause where they are from, you know. Every Cunts inside just wanting to get through their time.... In YOI it was a wee bit like that, suppose. Cause you're young and into that stuff.... No pure like the prison gangs you see in America but, know.... [in YOI] guys sometimes would come in that ha[d] been like [gang] rivals from outside in their schemes [before imprisonment]. You put them inside and aye they might fight, especially if there's a group of them in together.... most the guys in [YOI] are [street] gang [members].'*

SP1 indicated that, while gang affiliation in YOIs is very high, any gang rivalry is very much extrapolated into the prison system from the street. Yet, gang members often become isolated in the prison system, as they are incarcerated with other gang youths from around the country. The sheer variation of gang affiliation within the system forces young people to break down territorial barriers and cohabitate peacefully. Yet where pre-existing rivalries are evident conflict many ensue.

Yet the impact of being isolated from the street gang and brought into forced cohabitation with other gang members, results in prisoners feeling vulnerable. SP3 indicated why this might be the case:

*'You feel invincible in your scheme, eh? You got all your boys (gang) wi' you.... In prison but you are alone, aren't you? Aye, it does make you feel a bit scared.... You're vulnerable when you're yourself in [prison]'*

A crucial feature of gang membership is solidarity: surrounded by peers, an individual may feel emboldened, in stark contrast to imprisonment, where offenders realise they are captives, alone, and required to fend for themselves (Sykes, 1958), a realisation of vulnerability compounded by the fact that gang members are rarely supported financially, emotionally or socially by their fellow gang members outside on the streets. The sense of abandonment felt by many of the imprisoned gang members led them to question gang loyalty and their own membership. EP10 elaborated:

*To be honest with you, when you're locked behind your cell-door at night, there no gang to help you – you realize that in here. Where's your gang when you're inside. You've got to get through your sentence by yourself.*

EP11 supported this view and added:

*It's every man for himself inside here. When I come to jail they [fellow gang members] all left me. I haven't had no letters off them, no nothing. They're not bothered, obviously – not me proper mates.*

For many respondents, their epiphany of human abandonment intensified their 'pains of imprisonment' (Sykes 1958). Fellow gang members on the outside continued criminal activities, with the fast-paced, dangerous thrill-seeking (Katz 1989) leaving limited time or desire to communicate with imprisoned gang members, who then questioned the value of gang-membership, increasing the chances of a gang members engaging in processes of desistance. Imprisonment gives inmates time to contemplate wider life choices.

*I'm 34. I don't feel like I belong here anymore. In the YOIs, if you'd ask 'em about gangs they're singing like canaries....but it's different in here from being in juvey [juvenile prison]. You soon have to grow up in here. – (EP3)*

*'Every time the kids would visit [while in prison], I noticed they were just that wee bit bigger. You miss it all.... Makes you think where your priorities are.... well, should be' (SP10)*

While SP10 indicates that imprisonment enabled him to reassess his life choices, EP3's statement "*I don't fit in here anymore*", reflects the extensive literature which indicates that criminals 'mature out' of committing crimes (Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub and Sampson 2001), a finding that also emerges when studying the life-course of gang members (Moloney *et al.* 2009). Many participants felt that criminality had less meaning as one aged.

*My advice would be: keep out of it [gangs]. Go and get a normal fuckin' job. You might as well. Have a gang of friends. Friends who you sit and play X-Box with after work and have a few beers and have a giggle. They're the type of friends I want. And for years that's what worried me about going home. I've got some friends out there who I class as normal, and I think they do have a better way of life. They go to work 9-5. I used to laugh at people who worked 9-5, but I'm nearly 40, no kids, always looking over me shoulder.'* (EP3)

### **Initiating Primary Desistance**

Setty *et al.* (2014:48) describe such situations, where "*relationships between gang members can weaken when they go to prison...and a complete absence of support*

*from other gang members*". John Bowlby's attachment loss construct illustrates this plight and possible separation anxiety. Coupled with the impact imprisonment had on wider life chances (such as missing family, children, or hindering employment opportunities), most research participants discussed beginning pro-actively to seek ways to leave gang lifestyles behind upon release (Densley 2013).

*'It is only when you come to prison that you realise who your real muckers (friends) are. None of the boys from the scheme (referring to gang) came to see me, none. They would all say 'aye we will need to get up'. They never did but.... Made me see them for who they were.... [began to contemplate] why I even hung about wi' them.'* (SP5)

The realities of prison life were a stark contrast to the life gang membership was meant to provide, a romanticized materialistic construct (Densley 2013: 135-136). Rather than 'fast money' and a 'jet set' lifestyle, gang membership led to imprisonment in an overcrowded, threatening and morally claustrophobic prison environment (Wacquant 2001). The contrast between romantic construct and carceral reality was summarized well by EP1:

*'You start at the bottom. You're living in a shithole, looking up to the bigman who's rolling about in a Mercedes, and you think to yourself, 'I want some of that.' But in here you're just a prisoner.'*

This custodial reality grew progressively more resonant as most participants in this research were serving lengthy custodial sentences; harsher sanctions were imposed for gang-related offences involving weapons throughout the UK (Crewe *et al.* 2013). Long-term prisoners (LTPs) showed more efforts to desist from crime than short-term prisoners (STPs).

*'When you're an LTP you've more time to think don't you? More to lose. You don't get that time back, makes you notice [time] is precious. I got out after a lengthy stretch and didn't want to go back inside pal, nah, no chance.... See all my mates but that were [STP] they are still in and out.'*

*It's like a stop gap. Fuck man, most of them use prison like a wee break or rehab.'* (SP9)

Primary desistance as behaviour change is evoked by SP9. LTPs in the study were shown to be less likely to reoffend than STP. Furthermore, while STPs made little efforts to desist, LTPs made considerable efforts:

*'[When incarcerated in YOI] I was thinking; fuck I keep coming back here man.... Every time I ended up inside or even just in trouble, was cause gang fights and pure daft shit man. See staring at 4 walls every day man, makes you want to give that shit up, know.... I wrote my best mates [from the gang] a letter. Said I was moving away when I got out, and wasn't coming back to [Glasgow housing estate]. Just pure couldn't hang about wi' them anymore.... Too much trouble. It isn't worth it.... I never got [a letter] back.* (SP9)

*I'd spent so long in prison. This time I was just in for a breach [of licence] but my last proper sentence was a long 'un. So after I got out, I changed me lifestyle, done everything right. Got meself a job. When they [gang members] see you working on a building site, and this is purposely as well, this is to show them all, "Look, I don't wanna drive all them nice cars anymore. I'm gonna put my work clothes on'.* (EP10)

This values and life-style re-calibration illustrates secondary desistance. The effects of these changes were clear to see:

*If someone's from an ex-rival area, I tell them straight away who I used to be affiliated with...and, to be honest, the usual perception I get is...I've not had any try and fight me. So it's all about the mind-set. I met a guy [in this prison] who shot at me, and I shaked his hand and asked if he's still gang banging...I don't hold no grudges.* (EP6)

EP6 indicated that to desist, even long-standing gang rivalries were put aside. Yet this did not mean that EP6 did not project a hyper-masculine identity through his reputation or aggressive demeanour. Rather, this was done in a pro-active effort to keep would-

be assailants at bay, allowing EP6 to continue efforts to desist. Another participant, EP8, spoke of being “eager to change” and thus cease offending, yet while gang members were “free to come and go”, nonetheless, the ‘criminal code’ (Maitra *et al.*, forthcoming) meant that he still had to adhere to fundamental practices such as “*keeping [his] mouth shut, [and] not grassing*”. Should he break these codes then the gang would actively seek to assault him.

Additionally, many of the respondents were fathers, and felt gang activity was incompatible with fatherhood. Again, prison allowed individuals to acknowledge this and reflect on their lives thus far. Moloney *et al.* (2009: 307) note that “inability to support one’s child through legitimate work...may be [a] major obstacle in fathers’ desistance [from gang activity].” This was verified by responses from EP1 and EP6:

*‘For me, it was more about the money than the gangs...Me daughter, she went into care in [date], and when she come round to see me, I was so fucked, she said I was even writing like a retard. So, you need that support when you get out that gate. Cos when you’re in here, you have that security blanket. Soon as that gate opens, you need that support....it’s scary actually. Cos you’ve got everything you need in here. You’ve got food, a bed. Out there you’ve got nothin’. And that’s not the way to live your life, is it?’ (EP1)*

*‘It’s always a cycle, it’s like, we’re gangsters, we have our kids, we grow-up, our kids take over. You get in that cycle and you get stuck in it. You gotta pull yourself outta that, like I am, which is why I wanna move away with my lad and give him a better life. A little stone throw...come back in the weekend for game of snooker, quick pint, then go away. If you live in the war zone and you’re involved. In fact, as soon as they [the Courts] said I couldn’t see my kids, my criminal career was over.’ (EP6)*

Although EP1 accumulated large financial sums, the opportunity cost was “*not worth it*”. EP6 was eager to break the ‘cycle’ both for his son’s benefit. EP2 confirmed that prison allowed him to break free from pressures to adhere to gang behaviour, particularly stressful as gang members only receive a percentage of the overall profit they make.

*'When you're dealing, you keep getting pressured from the gang bosses...they keep askin', "When you gonna up your game?" Then you gotta make sure your customers don't rob you...you shoot at rival gangs. With some [rival gangs] if you piss 'em off, they'll go for your family. Being vicious gives you money and reputation...I could go out one night and spent £8,000 in a bar, but what does all that mean? But your money's never your own' (EP2)*

Deuchar *et al.* (2016a) indicate that prison can allow inmates a place for reflection. Following primary desistance, many make efforts to move from a criminal code to a reworked morality code (Maitra *et al.*, forthcoming; Mclean, forthcoming). This internal code enabled the participants to reassess priorities, life choice, and future life paths. SP11 discussed the role spirituality played in helping him desist:

*'Prison is horrible, but [it] was what I needed at the time. Don't get me wrong I could have went into prison and came out worse. That [was what] had happened with my previous sentences (which were STP sentences). My last stretch was 3 years...I had always wanted to be good, but couldn't get a [chance] to do so before. Doing 3 years, gave me that break man.... Started to like read the bible and that sort of stuff, [and] seen the wee [Chaplain] that comes round quite a bit. He helped me think about who I was inside (referring to his innate being). I wanted to let that good person out...[being allowed time] to [develop] my own morals [while in prison], away from [gang peers] helped me change to I was...now am in God's gang' (SP11)*

SP11, acknowledged that this change in identity, by way of spirituality, may never have had chance to take root had he continued to be allowed to offend without incarceration. While SP11 referred to the Bible as acting as a base for his spiritual development, Deuchar *et al.*'s (2016a) comparative study of Scottish and Danish inmates likewise identified a wide range of spirituality and religious practices as significantly aiding the desistance process, in as much that it allowed a moral reconfiguration away from criminal codes to spiritual codes.

## **Hindrances to desistance in prison**

The comparative longevity of tariffs in the US is likely to be one factor in gangs originating from within prisons in the US system. However, while established prison gangs do not appear to exist across all prisons in the UK, more general gang affiliations might nevertheless prove a hindrance to desistance, as demonstrated by others (Dooley *et al.* 2014). Sharing prison space with members from the same gang (continuations of street gangs within prison) places pressure on lower ranked members to continue to engage in offending patterns despite incarceration, making efforts to desist a lengthy, complicated process, interspersed by constant temptations to reoffend:

*I've got friends from gangs who I don't associate with... I used to be in a gang...I've cleared my name (through efforts to desist and distance self from gang affiliation), so when I'm released I could bump into one of [my rival's] mates, and you get on.*

**Interviewer:** *So the fact that you left [name of gang] did that cause any problems?*

*To get out [of a gang] you have to stand your ground – deal with the stuff that comes with it. (EP7)*

EP7's statement "you have to stand your ground" indicates that confrontations may arise with existing members of the gang, when an individual makes known their intentions of ceasing offending and leaving gang membership. In helping reduce the likelihood of violence, acquiring physical strength plays a crucial role; especially in a prison environment where gang members' usual recourse to weapon-use is often unavailable (see Maitra 2013). EP7 explains that while confrontation and agitations were directed at him for making efforts to desist, his physical size forestalled physical violence:

*I've not had no-one try and fight me.... I've always been able to fight, and now I've put some weight on - put some size on, as you can see.... [this] helps inside a place like this.*



While sharing prison space with peers from the same gang proved a hindrance to the desistive process for English prisoners, in Scotland it was more sharing space with existing gang rivals from outside the prison system that hindered the process of desistance. In the Scottish Prison System, gang boundaries were not so clearly defined and given that Scottish gangs are primarily territorial fighting outfits, inside the prison walls there is no territory nor immediate rival groupings defending their own territory. This allows individuals to put aside territorial rivalry while incarcerated; in terms of violence at least. Yet where gang rivalries are imported from outside the prison, violence may ensue. On occasions, members from rival gangs may be incarcerated for gang fights:

*'Me and [rival gang member name] just don't get on. Put us together and there's gonna be a scrape (fight). We both got [imprisoned] at same time for the same [incident] (a local gang fight) .... Course it just kicked off again when we were in [prison name] .... Three times we fought before they [separated us], once in the mess hall and another two times in the Peta's (cell). Eventually we got put on different [prison] wings.... Daft but you know. We both ended up having to do the full [custodial sentence] for always fighting wi' each other.... I just said [to prison staff] "it's yours faults for no separating us. We came in for fighting wi' each other and you dafties put us in same wing". Daft bastards. What they think going to happen.... They (the prison service) fuck up, and we end up paying for it.'* (SP17)

SP17 stated that his was not an isolated case, and many inmates have to share prison space with existing rivals:

*'You see it all the time. In prison, you canny relax cause people always come into your wing that you had been fighting with on the outside.... End up fighting more in jail than you do out of it.... Even when you want to get your head down and get on with your time and cut that shit (offending) out, you can't.... [because] you're watching your back man.'* (SP17)

Not only are established gang rivalries a hindrance to desistance, but cliques formed inside the prison can have the same impact. Arguably this absence of established prison gang structures leads to a more chaotic prison environment, where power is based less on gang-affiliation and more on 'powder power' (Crewe 2009), namely, the ability to procure and supply heroin and other drugs. Less permanent than being part of an established prison gang, this creates a more volatile penal environment (*ibid*). This was a particularly a problem for local prisoners, where "*drugs [are] more available, and havoc [is] created by enforcers who bully people: a lot more violence*" (EP9; pers. comm).

*They [prison drug dealers] rob you for anything. Tobacco, drugs, gold, clothing...[they] will cut you, break your jaw if you don't pay what you owe them and will still hurt you over petty matters... and try to make money out of weak and vulnerable cons.* (EP2)

Although EP2 did not specifically refer to desistance, it was clear that the presence of such drug gangs created on an *ad hoc* basis acted as a hindrance to those wishing to 'turn away' from criminality, violence and deviant behaviour. Numerous smaller, and consequently less powerful groupings and cliques, meant that prisoners wishing to desist found it increasingly difficult to begin the process due to having to negotiate with a variety of groupings, all adhering to their own group practices, norms and values. Desistance could also be hindered by engaging in prison's informal economy, particularly open to gang members due to extended connections. Such activities clearly exist, although prison authorities are often pro-active in combatting the sale and supply of drugs and other illegal products.

## **DISCUSSION**

Our insights suggest that the general lack of prison gang culture combined with the feeling that previous gang-affiliated peers had literally abandoned them at the point of incarceration enabled some of the inmates to begin to distance themselves from previous gang-affiliated attitudes and lifestyles and to contemplate wider life choices. They began to consider future opportunities for disengaging from gangs, and to reflect more deeply upon future life priorities and pathways. This was most evident amongst long-term prisoners (LTPs), as opposed to short-term prisoners (STPs). While STPs

perceived their period of imprisonment as one where they had to '*just get the[ir] head down and get through it*' (EP6), LTPs conceptualised imprisonment quite differently. Faced with the realisation of long-term imprisonment, LTPs sought to integrate themselves into the prison life. This typically meant '*not thinking about release dates*' (SP3). This stimulated reflexivity, whereby LTPs gave consideration to life choices and life-styles. Such thoughts often concluded in their wanting to leave the gang, and disaffiliate themselves; initially, at least, this was based upon the premise of wanting to avoid future imprisonment (this reason also changed with time, as they realised that gang members had forgotten them). Our wider experience with prisoners is that for LTPs the severing of contact is deliberate, remaining in touch disturbs them and interrupts the formation of relationships in custody.

Decker *et al.* (2016: 1) highlight the role of 'cognitive transitions' in the desistive process, and the way decisions to disengage with the gang are often stimulated by personal transformation through identity change as characterised by 'tenuous motivation, instability and uncertainty' (*ibid*: 27). Within our sample of LTPs, it appeared that the sense of isolation and direct lack of gang solidarity enabled many of the young men to experience feelings of instability and uncertainty that were conducive to transitional identities and fledgling desistance-related attitudes (McNeil 2012). In some cases, heightened spiritual and religious engagement supported these young inmates' cognitive and identity changes. Previous research has indicated that prisons can become landscapes for re-socialisation through stimulating the turning points that may lead young inmates to question their self-identity and offending behaviour (Maruna *et al.* 2006; Deuchar *et al.* 2016). Our insights corroborate these earlier findings, and suggest that the lack of direct in-prison gang affiliation often found in England and Scotland can provide young gang members with a space that may support them in re-assessing lifestyle choices.

However, although our data suggested a lack of prison gang culture, we also noted the way in which the young men in our sample continued to be exposed to the 'prison code' which prioritized 'bravado' and a strong focus on hyper-masculinity (Deuchar *et al.* 2016). Violent confrontations between former street gang rivals - combined with the competition for recognised status that arose from drug procurement and distribution within the prisons - meant that our interviewees were hindered in their attempts fully

to reform. As Baird (2012) argues, male gang members may occupy a significant ontological position in the field of masculinity, symbolized through the accumulation and display of power, respect, and money. Where monological expressions of masculinity are repeatedly given value by young men, violence may become entrenched and normalised (Carrington *et al.* 2010; Baird 2012). The male prison environment, as a 'marginal situation' (Maruna 2006: 163), clearly provides a salient context for such trappings of hegemonic masculinity to be reinforced. Particularly for STPs, who have very little time and space to contemplate alternative forms of masculine identity and potential lifestyle changes, this may mean that entrenched attitudes to violent crime may remain unchallenged and desistance-related attitudes may stay dormant.

This paper should not be seen as arguing the case that prison gangs, in the imported construct, are an insignificant problem, or that most gang members desist from criminality once imprisoned. Indeed, for some gang members "*prison is...welcomed...as a respite from the dog-eat-dog world of the streets*" (Fleisher 1995 cited in Jacobs 2000: 139 – own emphasis); rather than marking a cessation from criminality, it instead gives space for mental re-grouping. This opinion was corroborated by respondents' statements that prison enables one to have a "lie down" (EP1) and that "even if halted by custody, no sooner u are free, are back on the hunt for wonga. That what it all about" (EP4; pers. comm). However, for others, a "lie down" was not merely a temporary withdrawal from criminality, but rather, the arena in which to begin the process of desistance. Maturation, more responsibilities, an acknowledgment of the opportunity costs of gang activity and lower financial rewards than envisaged were all causes for desistance to filter into consciousness. Accordingly, the trajectory followed by gang members once in prison is not always as simple as 'importing' street loyalties into the penal environment; differences often exist between the prison and the streets, with the former sometimes acting as an unexpected catalyst for change away from an urban criminogenic.

The lack of a uniform, national policy regarding gang members in prison undoubtedly affects the process of desistance. Although this paper does not directly include data from interviews with prison officers or prison management, suffice it to say that wider conceptions around imported prison gang members significantly affected the policies

implemented by both sample sites. Often, it was these members of staff at the 'front line' who had to make such decisions, determining which prisoners are gang members and their management. These decisions had significant ramifications on how gang members engaged in the process of desistance: the prison in which a prisoner was held, the individuals with whom he was surrounded, his distance from his local area and the wider restrictions on his behaviour are all factors affecting the nature of prison custody.

To conclude, our data support the findings that a culture of intense penal surveillance interferes with gang-associated disruption in prisons. Pragmatism coupled with maturation contribute to an apparent demise of criminogenic external influence. Prison harbours potential as a site for reflective solitude and haven from toxic ties. In its ambit identities may morph, becoming more pro-social and less oppositional. Associates on the outside, through negative re-appraisal, inform a critical re-assessment of life-style attachment and identity. A recognition of lost values returns as the comparative quietude and safety of the carceral regime provoke psychological mellowing. But this somewhat utopian assessment, reflecting our themes one and two narratives, confronts the contrary forces of opposition and ever-present criminality: there is an awareness of the proximity of old gang associates, an awareness of the need for projecting identities to symbolise a fearsome self and importation of violent disputes into life inside. This dystopian assessment, most apparent in our thematic three narratives, sits alongside the intimidation of predatory drug dealers whose products are reputed to have been instrumental in recent apparent growth of prison disorder in the UK. New identities emerge in prison, but the penal environment retains a morally corrosive dialogue with the outside inimical to an enduring secondary desistance.

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